

New North Hill Manager Plans Change for Golfers and Greens

By CHRIS PECK



As 2 seasoned golfers arrived at North Hill Country Club they remembered a new manager was taking over for the first time in almost 15 years.

"It's the first day of the new regime," the one golfer said.

Doug Johnson, president of Johnson Turf and Golf Management of Weston, who took over the job last Thursday, looked around the clubhouse and recognized he had a challenge before him.

His immediate plans are to restore heat to the clubhouse's main floor and to replace the worn carpeting. But Johnson's company only manages the course. Any major improvements would have to be made by the town, he notes.

Building Inspector Kevin McDonald has cited the clubhouse for access violations.

"None of the exits from the building are in compliance...with the building code and therefore there is no legal means of egress from the clubhouse," McDonald wrote in a September inspection.

McDonald says he recommends the building be replaced even if plans to expand the course to 18 holes never materialize. The expansion was voted down at Annual Town Meeting last March.

"It should be replaced. It's not much more than a barn," he said.

Gordon Cushing, the recreation director, says although there seems to be no immediate plans for replacing the clubhouse, he hopes to at least improve it to meet handicapped accessibility.

"We're not sure if the building is worth it," he said. "Should we start all over again, or put more money into the existing building."

Johnson said, "It's an old, crummy building but hopefully we can keep it a little bit neater," as his staff moved tables and chairs. "We'll fix it up as much as we can so it will look better."

For the golf course itself, Johnson has some plans for next year. He would like to offer more junior clinics, lessons for young players from the golf pro, complete with their own tournament.

"Kids are the future of the game," Johnson said. "If kids don't play, down the road who's going to play?"

Greens fees and cart fees are expected to stay the same: 9 hole weekday \$11 and weekend \$13; 18 hole weekday \$18 and weekend \$21; power carts for 9 holes \$12, and for 18 holes \$24.

But he plans to evaluate the membership fees before next year.

"Some will be raised a little," according to Johnson, who says he will compare them to rates in other towns. He would also like to offer a "twilight rate" allowing golfers to pay a reduced fee after 4 during weekdays and weekends.

And there could be other options such as a 10-ticket game plan.

All recommendations would have to be approved by the North Hill Advisory Committee, he added.

Membership fees currently range from \$125 for a junior resident to \$1,025 for a non-resident family, with adult single, weekday and senior citizen rates also offered.

The fairways on which the members and daily guests play may soon look a bit differently.

Johnson said he plans some contour mowing to separate the fairways from the rough. He said this will be possible now because a new \$325,000 irrigation system should keep the turf in better shape.

While the contour mowing makes the course "aesthetically more pleasing," according to Johnson, it could make it tougher to play. "The ball is not going to roll as far."

Johnson's company operates several other town-owned courses, South Shore Country Club in Hingham, John Parker in Taunton, Locust Valley in Attleboro, and Sky Meadow in Nashua, NH.

He's excited about his newest job.

"Absolutely. It will be a good place for the



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community, where everyone can come and have a good time."

The selectmen approved the liquor license transfer to Johnson at its meeting last Wednesday.

The former manager, Dick Gunnarson, says he has no hard feelings about not getting a renewal on his contract.

"I tell everybody here give him a chance," Gunnarson said.

Johnson's bid promised to return \$120,000 a year to the township from golf revenues. Gunnarson's bid raised his previous \$70,000 figure to \$100,000 and even that made him "uncomfortable."

The shabby clubhouse was also inherited by Gunnarson when he took over as manager Jan. 1, 1981.

"At the meeting when we signed the contract, the building was condemned," Gunnarson recalls. "It took us about 2 months to replace the broken pipes and bring it up to code."

The same was true of the superintendent's house, also part of the property.

"The ceilings were down, pipes were broken. There was no heat. It was a mess," he said.

The clubhouse had been designed as a temporary building. Gunnarson said it was formerly the dairy barn used by farmer John Merry who built the golf course in the 1960s.

In the early 1970s, Merry sold it to a developer called Liberty Square Association which planned to build 240 condominiums surrounding the golf course and expand it to 18 holes, according to Gunnarson.

The developers went out of business and the property, including some 165 acres originally owned by Merry and additional land purchased by the developers, totaling about 300 acres, was sold at auction, Gunnarson said.

The town bought it for \$770,000, he added. "It was an absolute steal."

North Hill Country Club only uses about 65 of those acres, according to Gunnarson, on which about 20,000 rounds of golf are played each year by some 200 members and up to 1,000 people who pay per round.

His one disappointment was that his plan to expand the course to 18 holes and turn it back over to the township after 15 years "just got bogged down."

A former Marshfield biology teacher, Gunnarson now owns a course with his brothers Rusty and Bob, both golf pros. Bay Pointe Country Club in Onset was purchased by the brothers along with their cousins, the Stonefields, and another Duxbury family, the Shields.

Steve Daley has actually been running North Hill since 1993, Gunnarson said, noting Daley is a good people person. Daley said he was sad to be leaving for "sentimental" reasons.